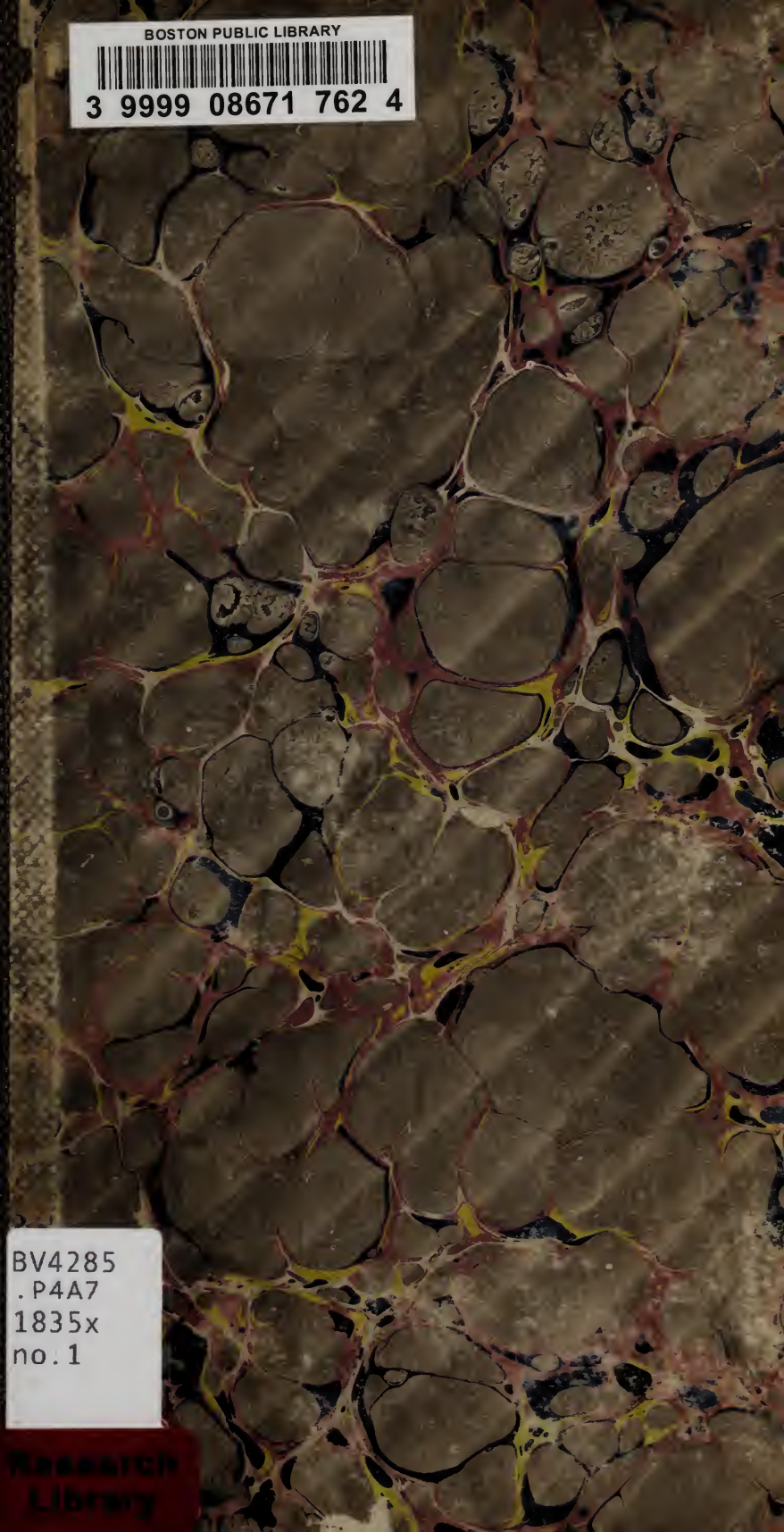
BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 08671 762 4



BV4285
.P4A7
1835x
no.1

Research
Library

* 5460.28

PROPERTY OF THE

Public Library of the City of Boston

SICUT PATRIBUS SIT DEUS NOBIS

BOSTONIA
CONDITA AD
1630.

CIVITATIS REGIMINE DONATA A.D. 1822

Added May 3. 1866 No. 73572

"THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT BOUND.

A

SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, JUNE 4, 1854.

BY

ANDREW P. PEABODY,

PASTOR OF THE SOUTH CHURCH, PORTSMOUTH, N. H.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

PORTSMOUTH:
JAMES F. SHORES, JR.; JOSEPH H. FOSTER.
1854.

Had there been a thought of publication when this sermon was written, the author might have bestowed more labor on its mere rhetorical form. He gives it to the press, at the request of many friends, simply because, being the transcript of his own honest convictions and sincere feelings in an important crisis of our national affairs, it may be at once a pledge for himself and an added inducement for those who sympathize with him to corresponding influence and action.

C. W. BREWSTER & SON, PRINTERS.

SERMON.

2 TIMOTHY II: 9.

BUT THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT BOUND.

When this epistle was written, St. Paul was a prisoner at Rome under Nero, and had just appeared for the first time, without human advocate or friend, before the tribunal of that most dreaded of tyrants. Though he was forsaken by all men, the Lord had stood by him and strengthened him; and he felt that he had been enabled to make such a plea in behalf of the Gospel, as could not but give it a lodgment in that corrupt and hostile court. But he expected speedy martyrdom. "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand." And his humility could not have veiled from him the certainty that, humanly speaking, by his death the most successful agency for the diffusion of the new faith would be terminated, the most influential voice upon earth sealed in eternal silence. Yet his heart leaps with

gladness at the thought, that, though he is in chains, "the word of God is not bound." There had gone forth a spiritual influence, which could never spend itself in the coming ages. There had spoken upon the earth a voice, whose echoes could never die upon the soul of man. There had risen upon the world a light, which could no more go down, but whose morning rays must yet mount to glorious and eternal midday.

As I walked the streets of Boston last week, witnessed the intense and melancholy excitement that pervaded the ranks of the crowded city, and passed by that building consecrated to justice, but desecrated as a prison-house for liberty and innocence, packed with a miniature army and bristling with deadly weapons, as if to guard the sepulchre of freedom against the possibility of a resurrection,—as I read the narrative of that sad procession with the cannon and the lighted match, the most mournful funeral pageant that had ever darkened the metropolis of New England,—this text, "But the word of God is not bound," was perpetually recurring to my thought. And in the disturbed condition of our times, with wars and rumors of wars, with giant forces arrayed against the most sacred rights and the dearest interests of man, with baffled enterprizes of reform and refluent waves of vice, with numerous grounds of discouragement for all who wish well to their race, this is the one thought which may allay our fears, revive our hopes, quicken our energies, and enable us in our several spheres and with our several

measures of ability to do what in us lies to "prepare the way of the Lord."

"The word of God is not bound." Protestant Christendom has in its homes and hands a law of perfect right, freedom, justice, love,—a law which would break every yoke, disarm all violence, reconcile all harsh contrasts of condition, and unite the children of God as brethren on earth and joint heirs of heaven. It is a law, which no conscience can disown or evade,—which none dare to pronounce untrustworthy or void of obligation,—which receives the professed homage of those who violate it,—which is owned as worthy to be divine by those who will not concede that it was given by the inspiration of God. It has its sure hold on the collective conscience. It receives fresh honor, confirmation and enforcement by the very transactions which set it at nought. It never attracts more reverence than when it seems to be least heeded. The human laws, which ignore it, do homage to it by the atrocities which they engender, by the enormities which they authorize, by the revulsion of feeling which they create. And while they move on in apparent triumph, and trample on freedom and equity, they generate in myriads of hearts the public opinion, to whose might they must succumb, and which shall yet in legitimate and peaceful modes supersede them by that "higher law," which, scorn it as they may, men know and feel is from God, and is charged with his omnipotence.

Not only do I rejoice when violence even in a holy cause

is frustrated of its end. Not only do I regard the public peace and order as too sacred and essential a good to be sacrificed even in behalf of right and freedom; for the reign of law is an antecedent condition to right and freedom, and slavery abrogated or spoiled of its victims by brute force would merge itself in the more galling and cruel bondage of anarchy. More than this,—as the corrupt passions of individual man need to be acted out in order that their full enormity may be perceived and felt, and as crime and vice are thus auxiliary to the triumph of virtue,—so do those forms of human legislation that are opposed to the divine law need their unimpeded execution, their full sweep and sway, to manifest their intrinsic deformity, and to ensure their ultimate repeal. In the recent transactions that have made so many hearts bleed, were it not for the poor fugitive himself, I should rejoice in all that has been done, and should feel that the hands on the dial-plate have made a rapid movement toward the hour when bondage and oppression shall be obliterated from the statute-book of the nation. "The word of God is not bound," and never is it so free, quick and powerful in its action on the great heart of a community or a people, as in these paroxysms of its conflict with inveterate wrong.

"The word of God is not bound," and we find ample encouragement for its future in its past triumphs. When St. Paul wrote, Nero was the Emperor, and the very senators and patricians of Rome were less free than our Southern slaves

are,—held property, liberty, life, but by a momentary tenure. Where are such despots now? A throne thus filled would not stand a day. Compared with Nero, the very autocrat of Russia is the father of his people,—the mirror of justice and humanity. Laws may be defective, oppressive,—still they secure some rights, some liberties, some immunities, even to serfs and slaves; and no monarch in Christendom is strong enough to override law, and to govern by his own untempered caprice.

When St. Paul wrote, the slaves in the Roman empire largely outnumbered the free population; and they were under no protection whatever either from the law or the moral sense of the public,—nay, the most virtuous men of that and earlier ages wrote concerning the wanton slaughter of slaves with greater indifference than we should manifest in speaking of the needless destruction of brute beasts. But Christendom threw off from her bosom this entire burden. Prior to the discovery of America there were centuries, during which the idea of the ownership of man by man was obsolete wherever Christianity was professed. Nor could domestic slavery have ever been revived on this Western Continent, had not the intervening ocean weakened the voice and impeded the arm of the remonstrant Church. But African slavery lies already and long under sentence of death. Its extinction became an embryo fact, from the moment that the slave-trade was disallowed by the collective conscience of civilized man; for the universal condemnation of the traf-

fic *involves*, and must in God's good time *evolve*, the no less universal condemnation of its result and object.

Moreover, what an amazing progress in general sentiment as regards slavery is presented by the history of the last century! It is not a hundred years since the afterwards Reverend and eminent John Newton became the praying captain of a slave-ship, and conducted regular religious services on board his vessel for several voyages before he even suspected that he was engaged in an unchristian calling. Wilberforce, were he now living, would be of about the same age with the oldest worshiper here present; and, when he first moved in Parliament initiatory measures for the abolition of the slave-trade, he was regarded and treated as beneath contempt for his audacity, and his name was for years a byword of reproach and ignominy even among the excellent of his fellow-countrymen. Yet he lived to see the hated traffic under the ban of piracy; the home of his old age was a shrine for pilgrims from every land; and his name has passed to the glorious roll of Christian victors and palm-bearers. Who can tell what conquests in the same field might be achieved by another Wilberforce, like his prototype content to enter into the conflict with the sole weapons that Christ will furnish, and to maintain his ground with the majesty and might of a meek and quiet spirit?

Slavery has not, in the convictions, prejudices and passions of the American people collectively a tithe of the strength which the slave trade had in Great Britain when Wil-

berforce first assailed it. And, as I have indicated, the sole weapon of his warfare was "the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God." His sole reliance was on the slumbering, but not extinct, conscience of a Christian people,—on the power of divine truth,—on those sanctions that lay hold on the spiritual life and the retributions of eternity. I have no doubt that the Christian feeling of the North as to this form of evil finds at the South a large amount of sincere sympathy, unuttered because there are so many legal and social barriers against its utterance, yet by no means unexpressed. The many masters who do all in their power to "give to their servants that which is just and equal,"—those who cherish a sacred sense of responsibleness to God under an uncongenial charge to which they were born, and of which they know not how to disburden themselves,—the numerous ministers of religion who watch and labor for the spiritual good of those in bondage,—the whole body of the humane and philanthropic in the slave states whom we are so prone to wrong by our indiscriminate denunciation,—all these are working in the surest and best manner for the abolition of a system that can be abrogated in but two ways,—either by a civil and servile war from the horrors of which every Christian heart recoils with loathing, or by the gradual and kindly working of those religious sentiments and feelings, which will perhaps extinguish all of slavery except the name and form before they shall be done away.

"The word of God is not bound." While worldliness

and selfishness, time-serving and sycophancy may seem on the ascendant, I believe that ours is still an age of religious activity and progress. Never was there a period, when Christian men felt and owned their social responsibilities as they do now,—when there was so little disposition to ask in a querulous, sceptical spirit, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Never was there a period when the Gospel was so profoundly felt, so distinctly owned, and so emphatically proclaimed in its social aspects and obligations. There are to be sure disheartening signs above our political horizon; but in a renovating and ever culminating Gospel there is power to sweep them from the sky. It is an unspeakable gain to have reached a position, in which none but mercenary theologians will dare to justify slavery as a matter of intrinsic right, or its continuance on any other ground than as a necessary and temporary evil. It is an unspeakable gain, that an institution, once imperative in its claims and demands, must now, in all quarters accessible to moral considerations, assume the attitude of apology for its very being; and that a description of measures in its behalf, against which the remonstrants were but of late a feeble minority, are now undoubtedly opposed by an overwhelming majority of the nation, and are forced through the forms of enactment in defiance of the popular will.

But let it be borne sacredly in mind that this is a cause, which must depend on the word of God and the truth of Christ for its successful advocacy. Having always enter-

tained this conviction, I confess that I have regarded and do regard with increasing distrust and disesteem many of the instrumentalities which have been relied upon by zealous opponents of slavery. The hostility to religious institutions and ordinances, the avowed scepticism and worse than scepticism which have entered so largely into organizations in this behalf, cannot be too heartily deprecated. The Church has not indeed been always faithful to her trust; yet she has always been in advance of the residue of the community in everything appertaining to the rights and the well-being of man. And even were it not so, the Bible is the sole charter of freedom, and of equity between man and man. It is only through the great truths which the Bible reveals, that man can lay claim to the justice or the compassion of his fellow. It is only in the name of Christ that liberty can proffer an availing plea. He who attempts human elevation in any other name or might than that of Jesus of Nazareth, has neither fulcrum for his lever, nor stand-point for himself. I look back through the long vista of ages, and see every stage that philanthropy has won marked by the efforts and sacrifices of Bible-loving, Christ-following men. I have yet to learn that aught has been wrested from the dominion of barbarism and brutality except through the name and in the spirit of Christ.

As I study the history of the past, I see repeated instances in which political intrigue has tugged hard upon men's burdens, and in place of removing them has only made them

heavier,—in which the sword has been taken in behalf of causes deemed holy, and has wrought more evil than it lopped away,—in which popular commotion has heaved mightily and hopefully among the bondmen of despotism, and when it subsided their chains were tighter and more galling than before,—in which wrath and clamor have sought to do the work of Christ and have only strengthened the heart of anti-Christ.

In this very cause now under discussion, it is worthy of remark that not only were Wilberforce and his efficient coadjutors eminently Christian men, but that emancipation in the British West Indies has been brought about by similar instrumentality, and bears at every stage of its inception and progress the tokens of its dependence on a philanthropy sustained and nourished by the word and spirit of God. In this country, it is an undeniable fact, (admitted with scorn and bitterness by the champions of slavery,) that the simple delineation of the character and fortunes of a Christian slave by a pen dipped in the fountain of divine inspiration, has awakened a profounder feeling in behalf of our brethren in bonds, and raised up a more numerous corps of advocates for their emancipation, than all the wordy warfare that has been waged, often in the same breath against this form of bondage and against that word of God which alone can make the captive free.

And now I have not introduced this subject here because it has excited your feelings and mine for the past week; for

it should rather be the office of the sanctuary and its ministers to allay agitation,—to pour oil upon the troubled waters. This I would fain do now, so far as there has been bitterness or animosity in our excitement. For feelings of this kind there is no ground. The processes of law, that have been unflinchingly carried through, though by fearful instrumentalities, were beyond measure to be preferred to any possible mode of successful resistance. We have no reason to doubt that the functionaries that have aided in the work, (with perhaps a single exception,) did what they conceived to be their duty,—nay, I am not sure but that I ought to say, what was absolutely their duty under the circumstances in which without their own seeking they found themselves placed. I could not but attach great, if not conclusive weight to the reasoning of the United States Commissioner on this point; for, if under the existing laws such a momentous issue as the personal liberty of the innocent must be tried, it certainly is much better that the adjudication should be in the hands of a conscientious and humane man, than that it should be left to those who could administer the law without compunction or relenting. We have also to thank the firmness and prudence of the officers of justice, that the cause of freedom was not stained and disgraced by the unbridled licentiousness of murderous outrage.

But there is this reason why the subject should be urged upon your cognizance. Many of you have been indifferent, some of you virtually or avowedly hostile to every measure

that might lighten the burden of slavery, and contribute toward its ultimate removal. Such, too, has been the prevalent condition of feeling throughout the Free States. Because, and solely because it has been so, Northern votes have fastened upon the country numerous aggressive measures of pro-slavery legislation, from time to time extending and nationalizing slavery, till, from being a limited and manageable institution, it has grown so as to overshadow our whole land, and to threaten most fearfully the integrity of our Union. This series of aggressions can be stayed and reverted only by an altered condition of Northern conscience and feeling. There must be aroused not a truculent and vindictive, but a calm and kindly, yet determined resolution that slavery shall at least be staid at its present limits of territory and power,—that Northern votes shall never contribute one iota more toward its extension or supremacy. If only this be gained, the problem which has now outgrown us will yet be overtaken. The vastly superior ratio of expansion, both as to population and resources, of free over slave communities, will revive the hope that now seems ready to perish. The Providence of God will open unthought-of modes of influence and avenues for peaceful and successful action, when once the national heart is turned in the direction of freedom. But the right feeling must first be awakened in individual communities,—in individual hearts. It is a matter in which you and I have sacred responsibilities as Christian people,—in which it behooves us to consult the

voice of conscience and the word of God, and without wrath or denunciation, without reproach or abuse, to purge our speech, our influence, our political action from whatever can be unworthy of the name and spirit of Him who announced it as his mission "to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, to set at liberty them that are bruised."